

April 13, 2008

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Abraham – the Believer

Galatians 3:1 – 9

The nub of the issue with the Galatian churches was that although they had received the gift of eternal life by faith – they were trying to live the Christian life by means of keeping the Law. They had been bewitched by the false apostles who preached a vile mixture of faith and works and led them to believe that they were justified – made right with God – **by doing rather than by believing**. And this is a crucial distinction. When we talk about justification we must necessarily not link that to any kind of doing on our part – but rather put it all on faith. Paul told them in 2:16 *nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified.*

This is difficult for many to grasp. The Bible talks about justification of the believer as something done quite apart from any effort on his part. We take hold of justification – being made right with God – **through the means of faith in Christ**. Believing in Him is the work if you will. Jesus told those who were anxious to know what they could do to obtain eternal life: *'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him who He has sent.'* John 6:29 And the Galatian churches had **wandered away from faith and gotten trapped in works**. Which prompts Paul to say *'You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?'*

In other words, Paul said, *'When I was with you, I preached something quite different. I even painted a picture for you of Christ crucified for your justification – don't you get it?'* He says that to the Galatians, Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. The Greek word here translated **'publicly portrayed'** means to **'post a notice'** like on a bulletin board in a public place. The word in New Testament times was used to describe what a father did when he proclaimed publicly that he would no longer be responsible for his son's debts. **But the message posted on the bulletin board of our hearts is not that our Father God will no longer be responsible for our debts, but that through the crucified Christ He has cancelled our debt. And the moment we believe – we are justified.**

Faith is important – faith is crucial – faith brings us into a relationship with the God who made us – and faith justifies us in His sight. And the Bible says that without faith it is impossible to please God. So it makes sense to try and get a handle on this thing we call faith, and this morning I want to do just three things: 1) talk about what faith is – the nature of faith 2) talk about what faith does; and 3) talk about the result of faith. Let's take them in reverse order.

The Result of Faith

What is the result of faith? I believe that Paul answers that question here in this section. *6 Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.* The result of faith is righteousness – or more precisely, reckoned righteousness. And **reckoned righteousness is justification. Abraham believed – God reckoned.** To be justified is to be declared righteous. One of the basic questions we all have is, **"How can sinful people like us be justified before a holy God?"** Justification is a legal term with a meaning like "acquittal"; **it points to the process whereby a person is declared to be right before the judge.** In Romans 4, Paul talks about this as well: *For what does the Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness. Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,* Romans 4:3-5 **The whole point about justification is that God worked – not us.**

This all goes back to Genesis 15 where Abraham has a conversation with God and gently reminds God that although He promised to give Abraham a son and heir – he didn't have one yet. And God said, 'Abe – lets go outside and count the stars – look up there – how many do you see? That's how many descendants I'm going to give you.' And then the Scriptures say, *'And he believed the Lord, and He counted it to him as righteousness.'* Genesis 15:6 And one of the points made implicitly that Paul brings out in Romans and here in Galatians – is that Abraham was justified even before being circumcised – that happened later in chapter 17 of Genesis. God did this so that no one could boast that he had done or could do anything to be justified in the sight of God. Abraham – the forerunner of all who would believe, was justified – pronounced righteous – on the basis of faith – not works. **The result of faith is justification.**

The Work of Faith

If justification is the result of faith – what is the work of faith? What is it that faith does? ***And the answer to that is that faith brings us into relationship with our Father God, and strangely enough, with Abraham.*** This is what Paul says, *7 Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.* And again in verse 9, *So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.* This is the reason we call Abraham, Father Abraham. He is the father of all who believe.

Paul tells us further in Romans 4 that Abraham *'...received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.* Romans 4:11-12 Implicit in this is the denial that Abraham is merely the father of all circumcised Jews. And it affirms rather strongly that he is instead the father of all who live by faith – circumcised or not. So faith makes us sons of God and sons of Abraham.

The father – son motif is all throughout the Bible and to understand it thoroughly we need to understand the concept of father and son as the Bible teaches it – not how we might understand it today. Today fathers are those weak-willed, politically correct, incompetent buffoons that appear on television and screen today in shows like the Simpsons. Can you imagine a show like *'Father Knows Best'* airing today? Fathers in Biblical times were figures of enormous respect and dignity – you poked fun at them only at considerable risk to your person. And there was another difference that is best illustrated by a show of hands. How many of you men who are of working age are in the same career your father is or was?

Very few sons today follow in their father's footsteps when it comes to careers. But that was not so in Biblical times. The expectation in those days was that whatever the father was the son became. If your father was a tent-maker – you became a tent-maker. If he was a toga seller – you became a toga-seller. If your father was a farmer – you became a farmer. And so your father was not only the head of the family – he educated you, shaped you, formed you, he passed on the family secrets– you learned from him when to plant, and how to design a good tent and the best places to sell your togas. So your identity was with your father – you were taught and mentored by him. And part of your responsibility was to bring honor to your father.

Sonship in the Bible is tied then to behavior, to function – learning to honor our father and bring glory to him – by representing Him faithfully in our lives – doing what he did. Jesus uses this well-understood motif when talking to some Jewish authorities in John chapter 8. Jesus claimed that Abraham rejoiced to see His day. And they say, 'O come on. That was 2000 years ago and you're not even 50 years old – we're the real sons of Abraham.' And Jesus said, 'Oh no – you see Abraham gave witness to Me and you don't even know who I am so you can't be sons of Abraham.' And so they come back with, 'Well actually, we're sons of God!' 'Oh, no you're not' Jesus said. 'I come from God the Father and He knows Me and I know Him and if you claim to be sons of God you must be lying. ***Let me tell you who your daddy is.***'

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. John 8:44 Jesus was not denying the genetic sonship of these guys to Abraham – but what He was saying was that the more important and fundamental nature of sonship was found in behavior. ***Which is why Paul can say that the real sons of Abraham are those who have his faith – not just his genes.***

The Nature of Faith

If justification is the result of faith and sonship is the work of faith, then we really should understand the nature of faith. Paul tells us that if we do anything apart from faith it is sin. The writer of Hebrews tells us that without faith it is impossible to please God. Faith is important – faith is crucial. So what is faith?

Faith only works in the dark

It is when you can't see that you need faith. If you can see you don't really need faith. Hebrews 1:1 says ***Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*** There is an exercise that a lot of seminar people do that is suppose to simulate what walking by faith really is all about. In this exercise people are paired up and one of them leads the other who is blindfolded around giving directions. And invariably when the blindfolded ones are asked, 'When did you feel it necessary to open your eyes?' they said things like: 'When I felt the tree – that is I felt the shadow or presence of something big in my path.' Or they got vague directions – 'You are coming to some stairs...sometime soon.' Or 'When I got directions too late.' Like, 'That was a log.'

At its core faith is hearing God and believing what He says is true. If we could see – it wouldn't be faith – it would be common sense. The book of Hebrews records that, *By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.* Hebrews 11:8 Faith is going out not knowing the details of the journey – only that God has said 'Go'. **Faith does not operate in the realm of the possible. There is no glory for God in that which is humanly possible. Faith begins where man's power ends.** George Mueller

Because faith only works in the dark – it is inherently risky – faith alone dares to trust God. Someone has said that there are two kinds of people in the church: risk-takers and care-takers. **If the risk-takers are fueled by the care-takers, they will all go to the undertaker with little to show for their lives.** If no one ever took risks, Michelangelo would have painted the Sistine floor. Hudson Taylor, the great man of faith who founded the China Inland Mission, saw that faith and risk were partners. He said, **“Unless there is an element of risk in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith.”** We are following a God we cannot see, to a place we've never been, with a whole lot of other people in the very same boat. **Faith destroys our inherent self-reliance that keeps us from God.** Faith only works in the dark.

Faith is taking the next step

Oswald Chambers wrote, **“Trust God and take the next step.”** Faith is doing the thing that God asks you to do at that moment, no matter how large or small. Again in Hebrews 11 we read, *'By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household...'* Hebrews 11:7 God told Joshua, “Be strong and courageous – take this land, I have given it to you. Cross the Jordan, walk around Jericho.” **We show that we are sons of Abraham when we do what God has said to do.** Abraham believed God – that is he did what God told him to do. Trust God and take the next step. **Faith is taking the next step.**

Faith is dependent upon who God is

Faith is not dependent upon who we are. Look at the great men and women of faith in the Bible. Abraham – sold his wife out, twice because he was afraid. There were times that he did not trust God. Don't think that you vault from victory to victory if only you have faith. If faith never runs smack into doubt, if truth never wrestles with the lie, if good is never at war with evil, if there is not at times a titanic struggle in my soul between trust and fear, how can faith really be faith? If I must choose between a faith that has stared doubt and fear in the eye and made it blink, or a untested faith that has never known the crucible of doubt, I will choose the former every time.

Sarah the wife of the father of faith – laughed at God's word. Moses – a disgraced murderer who ran away for 40 years knew that faith was dependent upon who God is. Jacob the deceiver, Rahab the harlot, Gideon the coward, Samson the playboy, Barak the fearful, and David the adulterer, all made it into the hall of faith – because faith is dependent upon who God is and not who we are. That is why faith that comes from within will never beat the faith that comes from above. Faith is not some virtue that we must work up – we cannot screw our inner confidence enough to give us this kind of faith – we run out of thread. Faith – real faith is from God and **faith is dependent upon who God is.**

Faith is founded on the Word of God

“Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.” Romans 10:17 The only foundation for faith is the word of God. If you look again at Hebrews 11 you quickly see that faith and the word of God are inextricably linked: In verse 8: Abraham went out when he was called – God spoke – Abraham went. In verse 11 it says that Sarah considered Him faithful who promised; later on the writer says that by faith Moses obeyed God's speaking. All the way through it is clear: God spoke – they acted.

Faith is founded on the Word of God

8 The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." 9 So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer.

The conclusion then, is that all who come to Christ come by faith. There is no other way to be saved. And there is no other way to live the Christian life. The life of Christ is the life of faith. It is trusting a God whom we do not see by doing what He says in spite of what our circumstances or our feelings or our friends tell us. It is a reliance wholly upon a sovereign God and believing that He is good and intends only good for those who love Him – and it is firmly cemented on the sure foundation of His word that never fails.

Our gracious God and Author of faith,

Let faith flood our souls and permeate our hearts – let it breathe in our prayers and inhabit our praises – let faith speak in our conversations and move in our actions – let it draw the boundaries of our lives. You have brought us to faith and yet too often we find ourselves weak and wavering when we ought to be strong and unswerving. When we should be scaling the heavens we find ourselves groveling in the dust. O gracious Lord, fan this smouldering spark into a white-hot flame until heaven fills our souls and all that remains is faith. Let Your word incite faith this morning and breathe into our souls the breath of life. Make us eternally glad in God so that we in turn will make others eternally glad in You as well we pray, in the precious name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto You.
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***